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Worried about your teen's toxic friends? Why banning them isn't the answer and what to do instead

First, determine whether it's a personality clash or if the friends are a bad influence

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Lakshana N Palat (Assistant Features Editor)

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Are you bringing in your own biases, judgements, past experiences that is clouding your interactions and observations with your teenager and their friends?

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Want to tell your teenager that you don't like their friends?

Would rather try climbing Mount Everest, says Dubai-based mum Saranya morosely. Mother to two teenagers, Saranya admits that she is dealing with daily fighting, squabbles and bitter arguments in the house, regarding practically everything from timing curfews to examination prep. "At this point, I don't want to even try telling my elder daughter that I really don't like her friends, though it really bothers me," she admits.

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It's tricky. Outwardly, there's nothing wrong with her friends. They come home, plan fun dinners and lunches with her daughter, and they all spend hours on the phone at a stretch. "Yet, they take a lot of advantage of my daughter, and get her to do their work, and also engage in 'harmless white lies', that just add up gradually. It does bother me a lot," she says. Once, when she tried bringing it up, her daughter snapped at her saying that she was over-reacting.

So, Saranya is resigned to letting it go. "Things are already so chaotic at home, I don't want to rock the boat," she explains. The age of teenage is like climbing a mountain itself, as Saranya concludes. It's fraught with rocky paths, exhaustive, and yet there are moments of fresh, comforting air. Sometimes, as many parents discover, taking the wrong path with your teenager only leads to getting lost in the woods, shouting, and scrambling to find them.

It's the age when friendships start to take center stage, magnifying already existing anxieties about losing control, children distancing themselves, and preferring their friends' company over family. There's no foolproof guide to navigating this minefield, just patience and learned sense of firm softness.

The conflict between concern and personality clashes

We're all human, there will obviously be some occasions where we don't just like someone, regardless of our age. So, how do you know that it's a case of concern that your teenager might be directly or indirectly harmed by a friendship, or if it's just your preferences acting up?

Tanya Dharamshi, a Dubai-based clinical psychologist from LightHouse Arabia attempts to differentiate the feelings. "In case of genuine concerns, these arise from specific, observable behaviours or situations that could negatively impact your teen's safety, health, or emotional well-being," she says. For instance, this could be when your teen is involved in truancy, or illegal activities, or being gaslit, subjected to controlling manipulative or bullying influences that fracture their relationships, harm their academic performance and family values.

On the other hand, a personality clash occurs when your teen's friend has different interests, values, or communication styles, that can cause friction or discomfort as your teen explores different ways of interacting. "It's more of a feeling of unease or a sense of incompatibility, without concrete, observable evidence of harm," explains Dharamshi.

“Expressing yourself non-judgmentally, such as, ‘I'm worried because...’ rather than ‘I don't like your friend, and 'you shouldn't spend time with them', conveys love and care, not control”



Tanya Dharamshi

psychologist at LightHouse Arabia

Acting from concern or biases?

Abu Dhabi-based Megan Kim, a 25-year-old expat, laughs as she remembers that her mother would warn about a particular friend, without any explanation. “I would ask why, and she would just say, ‘It’s my instinct and my instinct is never wrong’. I never got that, and we still are friends, with my mother still expressing displeasure about it. She only gives vague answers about how my friend seems too calculated, which translates to cunning according to her. As a result, I’ve stopped listening,” she says. Maybe it was because her friend’s vibrantly coloured hair, or her ability to sleep till 11 am on a weekend---something her mother was always appalled by, as she didn’t believe anyone should sleep after 7 am, on any day.

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Sometimes, we just act on our biases and fixed perceptions: If someone doesn’t fit our idea of ‘what’s right’, we tend to rule them out. So, in order to prevent that creating trouble for your teenager, start with observing your teen and their friend in different situations, explains Dharamshi. “How do they interact, communicate? Gather observable facts and speak to your teen. Gain other perspectives from

your partner, trusted friend, school counsellor, therapist and do so with the lens of genuine concern or personality clash – is your child’s safety, wellbeing and health at risk or is this a clash of personality difference?”

Keep checking in with your feelings and reflect. Is your response based on a specific incident, are you bringing in your own biases, judgements, past experiences that is clouding your interactions and observations with your teenager and their friends?

“Don't be dramatic and try to pull a 'them or us' move. That's a terrible, pressurising tactic and they will start hiding things from you, which is even worse”



Nusrat Khan

clinical psychologist at Human Relations Institute And Clinics

Expressing actual concerns: Respect, empathy and care

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If it’s not your prejudices and misunderstandings acting up, then it’s time to approach your teenager with concerns. This is a minefield in itself, and requires much tact, care, empathy, as both Dharamshi and Nusrat Khan, a clinical psychologist based in Dubai says.

First, as Khan suggests, there needs to be a sense of respect. “That’s very important, because if you’re not respecting your teen, you won’t even respect their friends, explains Khan. Respect is in your tone, eye-contact and non-verbal cues when you’re addressing such sensitive issues with your teenager. Do not

condescend or patronise them: That will instantly make them feel more defensive.

Watch your judgement, check the facts

Furthermore, there needs to be curiosity, connection and invitational language, continues Khan. “Watch your judgement, and check the facts, first. And approach this in a calm, regulated manner without seeking control. Choose your words well, and perhaps words like, ‘I’m trying to understand how this friendship supports you,” she says. Expressing yourself non-judgmentally, such as, ‘I’m worried because...’ rather than ‘I don’t like your friend, and you shouldn’t spend time with them, conveys love and care, not control, adds Dharamshi.

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Ask them hypothetical questions, which let them reflect and where they don’t feel ambushed. And when things get heated, take a step back and say that you will return to the conversation later. “You need to be the role model here, and putting it across that you are concerned about their psychological safety, instead of a matter of control,” adds Khan.

There will be resistance at first

And teenagers are teenagers, they will be defensive at first. No one is born with emotional maturity, and they will resist everything you say, regardless of how calm and collected you are. And that’s alright. “Some will be silent, or rebel openly as they feel as if you’re attacking their autonomy,” explains Khan. It is a process of patience and persistence and isn’t linear, your teenager will try to distance themselves from you at times, and unless the friend is particularly harmful and encouraging them to do illegal activities, take it easy and go slow with it.

What you shouldn't do at all

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Don't try a blanket ban on your children's friends, unless it's an absolute emergency that involves external help and counselling, explains Khan. For instance, Dubai-based Shirley Jose recalls how her mother just furiously blacklisted her friends, because she found them rude. "I didn't understand the problem then, and my mother didn't help matters at all by just telling me that I was 'forbidden' from seeing them, and sending them away when they came home. As a result, I just lied and went to see them anyway, only to realise later what her point was," she says.

Worse, don't be dramatic and pull a 'them or us', explains Khan. "That's a terrible, pressurising tactic for a person," she says. You need to ensure the psychological safety of your child, whatever happens. Else, they're going to start hiding things from you. "So, make sure the conversation remains constructive and reassuring them."

How to keep the conversation constructive and not argumentative:

Stay calm and open: Approach the conversation with a calm, open mindset. Avoid confrontation and keep the tone neutral.

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Listen actively: Pay close attention to your teen's perspective, letting them speak without interruptions—unless they're being disrespectful or you're getting too heated. In that case, take a break.

Take breaks when needed: If things start escalating, suggest a pause. Express that you want to understand their point of view and propose resuming the talk once both of you can communicate calmly.

Acknowledge their feelings: Even if you don't agree, validate your teen's emotions. Phrases like, 'I hear that you feel I'm being unfair' or 'I understand you're upset' show empathy and let them know they're being heard.

Use 'I feel' statements: Frame your concerns with "I feel" instead of "You always" or "You never." This reduces defensiveness and keeps the conversation focused on your emotions, not accusations.

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Stick to specifics: Focus on particular behaviors or situations rather than making broad or personal judgments about your teen or their friends.

Find common ground: Aim to de-escalate by seeking mutual understanding.

Even if there's no full resolution, end on a positive note, reinforcing your love, support, and willingness to keep the dialogue going.

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